

Connecting the Past and the Future

Disaster Relief Action for Wat Pa Klang Thung (temple)

Paul Cornelius reports on the making of the documentary on the conservation work done in 2012-2013 at Wat Pa Klang Thung (temple) in Pathum Thani, Bangkok, Thailand. The footage includes the opening ceremonies, a step-by-step recording of the condition of the ordination hall before conservation, the cleaning and stabilization efforts, mural preservation, laboratory processes, and interviews with experts and local residents of the area.

The genesis for this film project was the great flood that hit Bangkok and Thailand during the monsoon season of 2011. Much of central Thailand and the Bangkok region had been swallowed up in a massive sea of water that stood for several months. The temple that is the subject of this film was under one metre of water from October of 2011 through much of December of the same year, and the almost 200-year-old Mon ordination hall faced near ruin.

It was the aftermath of this event, and restoration projects that ensued in its wake, that brought the film production to Wat Pa Klang Thung in Pathum Thani, 50 km north of Bangkok. The passage of time, erosion, other floods and catastrophes, not to mention the holes in the roof, were combining to erase an all-but-forgotten artefact of the heritage of the Mon people in Thailand. Bats and other animals nested in the ceiling. Rain poured through holes in the roof towards the front of the hall. And, now, the most recent floods had helped chip away at what remained of the murals.

When first built, it must have been a quite a different site: the only stone structure in the middle of a forest; a few Thai houses perched on stilts some distance away; maybe three monks or



Floating in Bangkok (Pathum Thani), 2011

fewer residing there; and an absolutely stunning display of Mon murals of the finest quality. Today, only bits and pieces remain, along with the rear wall that contains the most complete mural.

The selection of Wat Pa Klang Thung as the subject of this half-hour documentary came after consultations with Dr. M. R. Rujaya Abhakorn and the staff of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization's Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO SPAFA). Dr. Rujaya himself had earlier been in discussions with Mon civic and cultural leaders about the particular interest and importance of this temple to their community. At first, SEAMEO SPAFA expressed the desire for a linear visual record of the day-to-day restoration and conservation efforts. As the producer and writer, as well as co-director of the project, I met with Dr. Rujaya and we both determined that it was possible to make a more substantial documentary. This would be a documentary that not only recorded the step-by-step procedures of the restoration and

conservancy but a film that also brings to light elements of Mon culture as well as provides a visual “text” that could be used as a template for future similar projects in Thailand and throughout Southeast Asia. This is precisely what the film achieves. It is not an “art film” or fictional narrative film that requires interpretation or explanation. Instead, it serves as a substantial effort to bring the interdisciplinary nature of film-making to bear on complex issues of culture, history, community identity as well as questions regarding the value, need, and degree of permanency of historical architectural conservation and restoration.

Disaster relief action for ordination hall of Wat Pa Klang Thung is a restoration project of an old 18-19th century Theravada Buddhist Ordination Hall that was flooded in 2011. The building is a good example of Ayutthayan wall-bearing architecture still standing with rare stucco decorations outside and mural paintings in the inner walls. The project cleaned up the building, repaired the damages to the paintings, and studied ways to mitigate the damage from future flooding. The site has been revived as a cultural learning centre.

These latter issues in particular inform the film in virtually every scene. It was clear that the devastation on the temple was widespread and whatever efforts made would be “a series of battles in a war that must eventually be lost.” However, questions regarding the loss of culture and heritage are so fundamental in the modern world that the conservators of Wat Pa Klang Thung thought it necessary to fight these battles nonetheless. Such battles may even be more important for nations such as Thailand and other Southeast Asian states, especially because as emerging economies and cultures that have only recently “modernized,” these

countries still possess vivid and tangible living connections to their heritage and history. Where elsewhere in the world these connections have already been broken, they persist, even just barely, in Southeast Asia. Thus the conservation of the temple would be important in maintaining that connection as long as possible. A filmic record, especially one focused on documenting the culture and heritage of the Mon community, would enable that connection to last in one fashion or another as long as the film itself endures – which could easily surpass the time left for the structure of the temple.

On 13 June 2012, the production first brought its cameras to Wat Pa Klang Thung to record the dedication ceremony, which was held in the newer section of the temple grounds. The two-centuries-old ordination hall had just been opened for the first time in over a decade. The production documented the damage on film for the first time, as well as the lingering beauty in the dim, worn murals, especially those on the back wall of the hall. The contrast between the new buildings and the small, isolated ordination hall could not have been greater. The glitter, size, and magnificence of the current structures dwarfed the hall. Yet a large crowd of people from the local community had attended the restoration dedication. The appreciative recollections of community members as they moved between the two sites inspired the creation of the film's original title: *Preserving the Past and Connecting with the Future: Pathum Thani's Wat Pa Klang Thung Conservation Project*.



Exterior of temple (Wat Pa Klang Thung) prior to conservation efforts

With partial funding from the Prince Claus Fund of the Netherlands, the film production team also benefitted from the invaluable contributions of its members. Dorn Ratanathatsanee worked for but a fraction of

his normal fee as the project's co-director and cinematographer. He has more than 30 years of experience in producing and directing documentary films and television programming in Thailand, as well as working as a cinematographer on feature films.

A recent MUIC graduate from the Fine and Applied Arts (FAA) division's television major, Ornvera Assawaterakiat, was brought

on as an associate producer and production co-ordinator. He has experience in post-production, scripting, and planning for documentary filmmaking in such places as Ayutthaya, Thailand, and ethnographic documentary projects in Bangkok's Chinatown area.

Included in the production chronology and footage are the following:

- Dedication ceremony and interviews with major participants from SEAMEO SPAFA and Mon community leaders.
- Pre-conservation video survey outside and inside of the ordination hall at Wat Pa Klang Thung.
- Video documentation of the recording of still photographs (in detail) of murals as well as an interview with a former monk and life-time resident of the nearby community.
- Video documentation of sampling from the murals and preparation for content analyses.
- Video footage of the preservation work in detail, including the salt removal process, wall panel cleaning, and stabilization efforts for the murals.
- Continuation of preservation work as it proceeded.
- Interviews with project experts and Mon cultural leaders.
- Interviews with local residents.
- A video documentation of the final project inside the temple.

As with any medium-to-large-scale production, no single person could possibly be responsible for every venue. It is not possible to be in two or three places simultaneously. Without a committed core production team, the project could never have been completed. Specialists from SEAMEO SPAFA and conservationists from Chiang Mai University, Silpakorn University, and the Thai Ministry of Culture's Department of Fine Arts also contributed to the conservation and restoration efforts at the ordination hall.

With professional background in film as well as experience in historical preservation in the United States, I produced the film by integrating and applying directions and perspectives of someone who had conserved and restored historical buildings and structures personally.

The film production dealt with a structure whose original builders possessed the skills and knowledge to ensure that their ever-so-impermanent constructions managed to last in good form for close to two centuries in humid and tropical environments. No direct

documentary history existed, at least as far as something as old as the ordination hall was concerned. While this did eliminate the ability to bring paper documentation to the film, it did not interfere with the next stage of the visual documentation.



Conservation efforts begin

The documentary captures the initial assessment of the damage to, and structural integrity of, the hall. Probably, nothing – short of a tidal wave – erodes the traces of human activity faster than the atmosphere of the tropics. At the Wat Pa Klang Thung’s ordination hall, cracks in the foundation, combined with humidity, and the assault of several floods over the past two hundred years, have taken much lustre out of the building. What was also damaging – that the assessment also discovered – was a surprise. The ordination hall had undergone earlier attempts at restoration and stabilization, but those efforts, in some respects, had made things worse – they created humidity and water pockets in the roof trusses through concrete “repairs.” The original builders understood their climate better and had provided for a “breathing” building that would allow easier evaporation of problematic sources of water infiltration – a lesson from the ancestors that was ignored by their descendants.

The film production made at least twenty visits to the site of the ordination hall. It also made a visit to Silpakorn University’s chemistry department, where their specialists were applying the latest techniques in assessing salt absorption in the walls –



Fine arts specialist cleans interior wall painting

measured by examining samples of Sa paper used in the cleaning process – which caused the wall murals to crumble and fall away. Along the way, camera teams documented the cleaning of the murals; it was an especially painstaking task that took months. Through it all, however, the film also documented not only the resurrection of an aging ordination hall but

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On two occasions, the production made a significant contribution not only to the ordination hall's history but to the understanding of the importance of the hall for the Mon and for Thailand's artistic history, in general. In the first instance, on the first day of filming,



Temple exterior as work nears its end

a middle-aged woman looked in on the ordination hall and mentioned that her father had been a monk at the temple. Less than an hour later, she returned with him and he explained what life was like in the vicinity almost 45 years ago. Then, it was a place for about 70 families, almost all Mon, who lived in coconut and mango fields, surrounded by a forest. Three monks inhabited the temple. Sometimes, just one monk lived there. Today, the area is developed and crowded. Trucks, scooters, and cars pass down the street in a continual flow. Not a trace of that former life exists, except for the ordination hall itself. In its interview of this former monk, the film intercuts historical footage, and recreates that sense of isolation and the loss of a way of life on the verge of disappearing permanently.

A second interview was even more important. During the year-long filming, the production discovered a contemporary Mon artist at work on a new temple in the Pak Kret area of Bangkok. The camera teams visited Thepneramit Chitrakumkrai at his workplace, and brought him to Wat Pa Klang Thung. He identified the work of the original



Rear wall mural after conservation work

artist as that of a master, probably a royal artist, and described the challenging conditions under which that person must have worked: drawing in freehand, using only candles, in heat and humidity, wearing a sarong, and climbing in and out of bamboo scaffolding. Not only does the contemporary artist seen in this film directly connect with the other artist who had been lost through the passage of time, he also presents an intimate understanding of the philosophy and religious and cultural motivations of his unknown and anonymous predecessor that enabled him to make something that speaks so directly to someone in the twenty-first century. Since that encounter with Thepneramit Chitrakumkrai, SEAMEO SPAFA invited him to Wat Pa Klang Thung on a regular basis to help cement the cultural heritage of today's Mon people with that of their ancestors.

These latter two examples of people whom the production found and incorporated in the story of the ordination hall exemplify the unique contribution that filmmaking can bring to the history and cultural

understanding of these type of projects. In the space of almost thirty minutes, the viewer becomes aware not only of the rich history of the Mon and the importance of retaining their cultural legacy, but also realizes the intricacies and overwhelming hardship in maintaining a living presence of the past in the present. This is one of the themes of the film, along with the direct knowledge it tries to impart to its audience. Additionally, SEAMEO SPAFA asked that the film provides a template, a visual text that could be used as practical tool to assist in archaeological preservation in Thailand and in the rest of Southeast Asia. This is not an insignificant task: to provide something that many people would expect to be dry, academic, and technical but instead manages to engage the interest and imagination of those affected by restoration and conservancy. After all, the film proposes the idea that this work is important and, in its own way, exciting. Ultimately, the film does this by demonstrating the importance of a wide variety of people and groups of people involved, from specialists in the chemistry labs to former monks still living their everyday lives in the shadow of a past that has begun to dim around the edges and eventually disappear.

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